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# Girls' Aesthetics of Existence in/With Hayao Miyazaki's Films

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## Abstract

In this article, I analyze the processual aesthetic production of girl subjectivity in/with Hayao Miyazaki's films through a feminist materialist perspective informed by the writings of Karen Barad, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, and Affrica Taylor. I elaborate on feminist materialist concepts such as those of relational ontology, aesthetics of existence, worldmaking, mythopoesis, queer kin, and gender/sexual difference. With these concepts, I philosophically and ethnographically inquire in/with girl spectators who are interested in the experimentation with new modalities of existence that do not limit to those of success and alienation, but allow for creative possibilities of rupture, recomposition, and transversalization of girl subjectivities.

## Keywords

girls, feminist materialisms, Miyazaki's films, gender

## Introduction

Animé director Hayao Miyazaki is known for films such as *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (Dempsey & Miyazaki, 1984), *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997), and *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) among others depicting wondrous challenging worlds (Cavallaro, 2006). These films bring teenaged girls—also known as *shojo*—to the encounter with forces that are more-than-human (e.g., nature, the magical, and the spiritual), calling for acts of response-ability “regardless of the difficulties, afflictions, and humiliations involved in the process” (Cavallaro, 2006, p. 5). In Japanese, the term *shojo* means teenage girl and designates a genre of manga and animé where girls are the main carriers of the narrative. In Miyazaki's films, the characterization of *shojo* neither identifies with Western animation, in which girlhood is a mix of naïveté and spectacularization, nor with its normative treatment in animé, in which girls tend to be dreamy, passive, or ultra-feminized evil fighters. Miyazaki's girls are courageous, compassionate, independent, and located in worlds that are hybrid and imperfect (Cavallaro, 2006; Napier, 2001). In the course of their arduous journeys, Miyazaki's *shojo* does not tend to arrive to full fixes of their messed up worlds. Nonetheless, their ability to respond to radical others affords them with new visions, possibilities, and renewed hopes to go on with their lives.

A more-than-human sense of relationality stems from Miyazaki films, one that goes hand in hand with what Barad (2008) describes as a *materialist feminist relational ontology* that challenges “the classical ontological condition of

exteriority between observer and observed” (p. 133). A relational ontology does not understand reality as composed by things-in-themselves laying out there inert to be represented by humans. Human and non-human forms of being do not preexist but come to matter through ongoing dynamic processes. According to Braidotti (2013), this relational ontology connects with an ethic quest for the productive, creative forces of life and for pragmatic, embodied, located, and transversal forms of knowing in the continuum of nature–culture. Furthermore, this relational ontology seeks a viewer who not only recognizes that unconventional figurations of girlhood are central to Miyazaki's films, but who also considers such figurations to be essential in imagining alternative *ecologies* beyond neoliberal models of girlhood.

We can notice the creation of these alternative ecologies in many of Miyazaki's films. I take *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) as a possible example. In this movie, Sen/Chihiro, the 10-year-old protagonist, is initially presented as an overprotected and apathetic child. The unexpected transformation of her parents into pigs puts Sen/Chihiro in an overwhelming quest into a dystopic world. Sen/Chihiro is found by a boy named Haku, the former spirit of the Kohaku River. He advises Sen/Chihiro to serve and clean polluted spirits in a bathhouse, which is run by

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witch Yubaba. Yubaba steals both people's and spirits' identities to retain them in the spirit world, and makes them work in dangerous and gruesome jobs. As Sen/Chihiro immerses in the life of the bathhouse, we witness how her initial detachment and insecurity moves into an active involvement in its eerie daily reality. Sen/Chihiro endures many adversities and fears, as well as the loss of her own identity. However, the skills gained through hard work and the building of new relations becomes self-actualizing. Through the course of the film we see Sen/Chihiro transforming into a courageous, empathetic girl.

While trying to help Haku out of a curse, Sen/Chihiro realizes that Haku is not a boy but the spirit of the Kohaku River. This event unexpectedly fosters the remembrance of a moment in Sen/Chihiro's childhood when she lost a shoe in the river and jumped in, which provokes a reacquaintance with her former self. The movie presents subjectivity as neither one nor individual but collectively and outboundly produced. A life occurs in relations of care, entanglement, coexistence, and worldmaking with and for others (Haraway, 2008).

Contrary to understanding life as a process of becoming-with, becoming-other as happens in *Spirited Away*, Harris (2004) has described the neoliberal landscape as one that narrows the entire production of girlhood to the binary *can-doers/at-risk*. Neoliberalism presents self-making and success as a personal girl project, stressing individual choice and responsibility, in which some succeed, and some take risks, make bad choices, and fail. Such discourse operates by concealing the social, political, and economic circumstances that shape young women's life opportunities. Girl studies inquire how contemporary young women's world-views, social experiences, and cultural practices reproduce/resist the aforementioned neoliberal subjectivity models. Girl studies are specially interested in studying how, within a context of extreme homogenization, young women remain productive and engage in countercultural practices that "question the places allocated within their worlds [making] possible the articulation of stories that disrupt common narratives of their experiences" (Harris, 2004, p. 56).

In this article, I take into account girls studies' interest on issues of resistance and counterculture while separate from its privileged emphasis on the girl as a cultural construction, to purpose instead girl subjectivity as a discursive-materialist production. To elaborate about this concept of girl subjectivity, I draw from feminist materialisms (e.g., Barad, 2008; Grosz, 2012; Haraway, 2008, 2014, 2015) reconstructive childhood studies (e.g., Taguchi, 2010; Taylor, 2013) and the aesthetics of existence (Guattari, 1995, 2008; Lazaratto, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2010, 2016). These different theories have a common onto-relational understanding of ecology as a production that is both human and non-human (Guattari, 2008; Haraway, 2008, 2014, 2015). This means that ecology is not understood as a closed system or place,

but "as a catalyst for change, a complex open-ended process to be conjured up by different modes of existence (material, social, mental)" (Brunner, Nigro, & Raunig, 2012, p. 40). This onto-relational view considers that "the world is precisely what gets lost" (Haraway, 2004, p. 90), when we implement strict binaries such as nature|culture, can-doers|at risk, and girl|nature. Materialist feminisms suggest that the practice of an aesthetic of existence is one of the possible ways out from these binary entrapments.

## Aesthetics of Existence

An *aesthetics of existence* (Brunner et al., 2012; Guattari, 1995) accounts for transversal relations between subjects and objects, and more specifically between girls and Miyazaki's films. An aesthetics of existence does not imply an aesthetization of life, but the possibility of "[grasping] subjectivity in the dimension of its processual creativity, instead of objectifying, reifying, and scientifying it" (Guattari, 1995, p. 13). In an aesthetics of existence, subjectivity has a relational status that is not merely human but a production sui generis that emerges from the interaction and experimentation with materials of expression.

An aesthetics of existence conceives art as a living practice, and identifies in the work of the artist a methodology to insert mutations and bifurcations into given logical connections, and generate heterogenesis (Guattari, 2008). Agreeing with this, O'Sullivan (2010) suggests that art has a "rupturing quality" (p. 196) that "short-circuits [all] sorts of cognitive and conceptual capacities . . . and other habits of spectatorship . . . whilst opening us up to other perhaps more unfamiliar but more productive economies" (p. 196) through the generation of new blocks of sensations, percepts, and affects. Miyazaki's films function as an aesthetic assemblage, which avoid confirming a subjectivity that is already in place (e.g., *can-doers/at-risk*), but anticipate a subject for the future and that still is not in place. In this respect, Cavallaro (2006) affirms that Miyazaki's viewing experience precisely challenges central assumptions of humanism and anthropocentrism by presenting shocking and unfamiliar worlds: "Miyazaki's movies transport the viewer into a parallel reality where neither man nor his humanist certainties could conceivably constitute the center of the universe" (p. 176). In this respect, Miyazaki's *shojo* are placed in situations where life needs to be regenerated, "where the systematizing structures and rationalizing processes of the modern world have been destroyed" (Napier, 2001, p. 123). Miyazaki's *shojo* are called to be ethically creative in the sense in which, for Guattari (1995), an aesthetics of existence necessarily involves the responsibility to inflect "a bifurcation beyond pre-established schemas" (p. 107), and a transversal work across given mental, social, and environmental boundaries with the aim to build collective enunciations.

This describes what O'Sullivan (2016) calls the *aesthetic impulse* or when art is invested in the making of worlds or mythopoesis. Mythopoesis happens when art presents the world as *otherworldly*, a world outside to what-already-is, bringing the viewer "to the production of a new way of being in the world" (p. 11).

*Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) deploys both a world and a subjectivity for the future. Miyazaki (2008) has explained that the project was inspired by some friends' daughter during a summer vacation in the mountains, and noticing how she actively reengaged with the world during that period of time. Miyazaki wondered what would make it possible to carry on such a sense of engagement with the world that she observed in the 10-year-old girl during her vacation, into the future. *Spirited Away* sought to address adolescent girl audiences with questions about agency, engagement, and affect/being affected.

Haraway (2014) argues that these *otherworldly* figurations open spaces for thinking in the possibility that our ecologies are not restricted to the positions of success and alienation (e.g., can-doers[at-risk]) but to positions that open to practices of *worlding*. The political function of such figurations is to build an affective and intimate connection of viewers to fantasies of spellbinding creative worlds, and to the nightmares that these worlds may/will endure. It is also a way for thinking about *girls* not as individuals or subjects, but as sites of collective production centered on "practices of attention and insertion [functioning] at the heart of subjectivity that are always *with* the world and existence instead of *in* the world" (Brunner et al., 2012, p. 46).

## From Nature's Child to Girls' Worldmaking Practices

It is key to notice that the study of worlding practices has not been a concern of girl studies so far. Nonetheless, two theoretical developments provide a path to start moving in this direction. First, reconstructive childhood studies have engaged in a critique of the nature's child narrative prevalent in the definition of the relations between children/nature/culture (e.g., Taylor, 2013). Second, new materialist feminisms have questioned how post-structural feminisms continue privileging a humanist production of subjectivity with a focus on discourse and culture, and see nature as a fixed, inert site of reproduction, instead of a historical, dynamic force of production (worlding). I elaborate on these theoretical developments in what follows.

Reconstructivist childhood studies have offered a thorough critique of one of the central narratives of childhood subjectivity, which is the *Nature's child*. According to Taylor (2013), this narrative renders the match between childhood and nature as almost predestined and unquestionable. It assumes that nature is the best teacher, that children's well-being can only be ensured by returning children

to nature, that nature is an inert entelechy waiting to be discovered by children, and that the relation between nature and children can only be imagined as a benign romance.

The *Nature's child* narrative prioritizes nature over culture, still conceiving the two as ontological opposites. By exposing the interdependence of childhood and nature in the *Nature's child* narrative, Taylor (2013) affirms that any intent to reconstruct childhood depends of a reconceptualization of nature and vice-versa. The *Nature's child* narrative romanticizes both nature and childhood. First, it transforms nature in something taken for granted, de-materialized and unitary, instead of productive, multiple, and worldly as new ontologies and new materialist feminisms defend. Second, it presents culture and society as detrimental for children, and therefore creates childhood as a distinguished moment in life segregated from adulthood. Third, it builds an idealist discourse of nature that deprives children from a material and embodied relation with the hybrid, messy, and power-ridden realities making up the worlds of today. Fourth, such disembodied understanding plays off childhood as a universal condition, erasing the differences configuring children's material bodies as sexed, aged, raced, and classed. An obvious outcome of all these arguments is that girl bodies and ecologies are irrelevant for such narrative, girl bodies simply do not make any difference in the world.

Obviously, this is not the narrative of nature that Miyazaki's films deploy. The story of *Nausicaä From the Valley of the Wind* (Dempsey & Miyazaki, 1984), the first full feature film directed by Miyazaki, is not situated in the romantic landscape presupposed in the *Nature's child* narrative, but in a desolated world that has been poisoned by human technology and that threatens the entire survival of human kind. Nausicaä is a young princess living in a kingdom that relies on wind technology to protect itself from the attack of insects and the poisoned jungle. In the movie's opening scene, we see Nausicaä using her weaponry to conduct a scientific experiment in the core of the polluted jungle where everyone else fears to go. What drives Nausicaä throughout the film is not to overcome the forces of the jungle but to become-with it. She seeks to understand the jungle not as a murderous place as it is seen by human kind, but to investigate its productive and restorative force with the aim that all types of life will be possible again. The film shows how existence is the product of "actual encounters" (Haraway, 1997, p. 67) rather than a Cartesian distance between subjects and the world that surrounds them.. Miyazaki situates his *shojo* fully enmeshed in these dynamic and complex flows. As a practitioner of making other worlds possible, Nausicaä seeks for a subject-yet-to-be in the viewer (O'Sullivan, 2016). The film invites us to think in the relation of girlhood and world as a practice of *queer kin*. Queer kin is a term that Taylor (2013) adopts from Haraway (2015) to figure "deliberately irreverent and

counter-essentialist,” (p. 82) non-normative, and non-blood-line figurations of how children may relate with non-human others.

Haraway (2014, 2015) explains that queer kin is produced through moments of respectful intimacy and correspondence in assemblages of human bodies, language, technology, and non-human species, in which creative and non-parasitic forms of coexistence are built. Some of these moments are masterfully conveyed in the film through images showing a striking nearness, acts of care, and entanglement between Nausicaä’s body, technology, the jungle, and the insects.

Different from poststructuralist feminism, new materialist feminisms do not hold an understanding of nature as other, but as a *nature–culture* continuum. In Haraway’s (2008) terms, nature is an all-pervasive *commonplace*. It is a mix of material-discursive in the sense that is both *topos* (material, local, and complex) and *trope*, or *turn*. This is, nature as an invention of other conversations, metaphors “about inhabitable terrain other-worlds” (p. 159). Inspired by Haraway, Taylor (2013) asks for a queering of the *Nature’s child* narrative, as a move away from its idealism and into “figures,” perhaps of girlhood, “[that] are purposefully impure, down to earth, confabulated, and confounding” (p. 73).

*Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997) could be seen as one of these turning figurations. Using Taylor’s (2013) terms, the film confabulates and confounds dominant motifs in Japanese lore with the aim of deploying an otherworldly story that ruptures any sense of familiarity with the codes of historical drama (O’Sullivan, 2016). Situated in medieval Japan, the film narrates the battle of the ironworkers with the forest-gods. Miyazaki (2008) seeks to present both a social and natural history of medieval times, which was more diverse and complicated than what the habitual aristocratic stories of samurai offer. As Napier (2001) asserts, the film delivers “an alternative, heterogeneous, and female-centered vision of Japanese identity for the future” (p. 176). The casting is composed of unprecedentedly varied group of female characters, who defamiliarize the viewer both from dominant views of history and their concomitant presentations of Japanese women as weak, dependent, and secondary to the male characters. On one side, we find Lady Eboshi, the entrepreneur ruling the iron foundry fortress, her working force made of former prostitutes, and gifted lepers who craft sophisticated gun technology. On the other side, we find the *kami*, ancient gods linked to the forces of nature, which include San, Princess Mononoke the adopted daughter of Wolf Goddess Moro, and Wolf Goddess Moro herself.

In addition, the otherworldly narrative of *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki 1997) is delivered through a resistance to clear-cut solutions that present subjectivity as made of multiple and contradictory belongings (Braidotti,

2013). We can see how Lady Eboshi is greedy, bellicose and seeks to cut the head off the *shishigami*, the spirit of the forest. But at the same time, she is also presented as magnanimous toward communities that had been oppressed under the rule of the samurai, such as the prostitutes, lepers, and non-Japanese ethnic groups. We see how the gods of the forest are magnificent endangered creatures embodying the disappearing heterogeneity of nature. We also notice how anchored they are in a time that it does not exist anymore, remaining dogmatic, revengeful, and undetermined to find ways of coexistence.

Furthermore, the destruction of the forest-gods is not simply narrated through a logical argument, such as that running a foundry requires to cut and burn trees and eventually the forest. On the contrary, *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997) is a work of mythopoesis, in the sense in which the story does not proceed through the use of a rational component, but through the creation of another world that is altering. The event that sets the development of the narrative is the curse in that a derailed god-bore puts in young lord Ashitaka forearm. Ashitaka discovers that the god-bore had become a devil as a result of an iron bullet found inside its body. This takes him to leave his community and find the story behind the bullet with the hope that this will help him to get rid of the curse. The journey takes him to the iron fortress, the magic forest, and the meeting with San, Princess Mononoke.

The climax of the film is the hunting and decapitation of the *shashimi* in hands of Lady Eboshi’s entourage, which results in its headless body becoming a destructive force that devastates everything both in the forest and the fortress. San and Ashitaka endure the disaster and work together to get *shashimi*’s head back in his body. This brings the end of mayhem and an affirmation of life as something that transforms but never ends; we see grass growing, and leaves popping out of trees. The film concludes with Ashitaka and San going on with their lives. Although Ashitaka is convinced that a new beginning is in place, San cannot forgive the humans for the losses and pain. The two characters declare love for each other, while they depart in different directions committing to visit every once in a while.

Consistent with its avoidance of definite solutions, the story of the film is not just one of renewed hope but also one of unrecoverable losses, something that shows how Miyazaki aligns with a relational ontology of making a fiction out of many combined references, nested stories, social and immaterial forces, and multiplicities instead of binaries. In this case, art “does not necessarily offer a reassuring image of a subjectivity” (O’Sullivan, 2016, p. 2). However, as Deleuze (2010) discusses in relation to the cinema of the time-image, in the avoidance of providing closure lays down a possibility of reengagement with the world by affirming that the future is open to change (Rushton, 2012).

It is in this respect that *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997) calls for viewers who want to continue the game of troping images, “echoing a logic of strangeness and autopoietic functioning” (p. 4) in their own lives.

*Princess Mononoke* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 1997) and *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) not only propose a more-than-human relationality with the world but also invite us to recognize that sexual/gender difference is not a morphological or social category but an ontological one. We can see how the relations of Sen/Chihiro with Haku, and San with Ashitaka are not purely binary romantic heterosexual couplings, such as those populating Western animation. Such heterosexual couplings continually bring the world back to what it already-was rendering unviable any differential production while presenting nature and subjectivity in essential and fixed terms. Contrary to this, Grosz (2012) remarks that sexual/gender difference is what precisely enables an understanding of nature as a productive, creative, and historical force:

Sexual difference is the condition for the existence of multiple worlds, not just a single shared world. Sexual difference entails that each subject not only occupies its own morphological, perceptual, and associative relation to the world but that it can indirectly access other morphological, perceptual and associative relations through their capacity to address, engage with and co-occupy a shared world, a world other than the one immediately available to the subject, through its relation to the other. (p. 72)

Both Grosz and Miyazaki cultivate an understanding of sexual/gender difference as neither scripted by cultural rule, nor morphologically given. In their own different ways, philosophical and filmic, they present sexual/gender difference as a relation with one and other that is productive, open-ended, and differencing. That is, sexual/gender difference is “what does not yet exist, what has nevertheless the right to exist and elaborate itself” (Grosz, 2012, p. 72). We can see the processual elaboration of a relation with one and other that Grosz refers to when Sen/Chihiro realizes that Haku is the spirit of the river and this concomitantly renews her connection with the world and brings back her lost identity. We can see it as well in the relation between Ashitaka and San and their mutual realization in that being is not necessarily defined by opposites, but through caring alliances and multiple belongings. *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) or *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997) show that nature is not a place of origin that has been overcoded by culture, but of life, loss, regeneration, and open-endedness.

Grosz (2012) affirms that it is only by understanding sexual/gender difference as linked to such productive view of nature that we can overcome the nature|culture divide, and see nature–culture as mutually conforming in dynamic, ever changing continuums. The ways Nausicaä, San, and Sen/

Chihiro act in the world embody “the ontology of sexual difference [as] entailing sexually different epistemologies and forms of pragmatics that is, different relations to subjects, objects, and the world itself” (p. 72).

In this respect, I conclude this section by affirming that the relational ontology behind Miyazaki *shojo*’s ecologies offers its viewers the possibility to envision girls as subjective assemblages of worlding practices that are otherworldling. Henceforth, such relational ontology deploys an understanding of subjectivity as an outbound and processual creation made of many contingent fluxes and transversal references. The film calls for a kind viewer willing to experiment with an aesthetics of existence that circumvents the economy of pre-determined equivalences (can-doers|at-risk), and its persistent understanding of the girl’s sexual difference as the reproductive token of the patriarchal, anthropocentric, and neocolonialist order of the neoliberal state (Harris, 2004).

## Girls’ Transversal Processes of Subjectivization

In this section, I use the theoretical ideas and analysis presented so far *to think in* and *with* data (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Taguchi, 2012). My data consist of six women’s written responses to a list of eight exploratory questions centering on Miyazaki’s spectatorial experience. I had a preference for written responses with the hope that my participants engaged in writing as a constitutive process of thinking that offers writers and readers opportunities for reflecting on the self both as a process and product, as partial and located (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

The questions posed to participants addressed the following themes: (a) self-introduction, (b) biographical reconstructions of spectatorial experience in connection with different biographical moments, (c) motivations/affects behind their most loved Miyazaki’s movie/s, (d) reasoned rating of their interest/affiliation with Miyazaki’s films, and (e) affects connected to *shojo*’s characters, Miyazaki’s worlds, and senses of time and narrative in the films in comparison with Western animation. Concurrently, the questions suggested participants to write about films and scenes of their own preference.

The sample pool of the study consisted of six women between 21- and 39-years-old who were and had been consumers of Miyazaki in their childhood and youth years, and who identified as art practitioners. Based on my theoretical framework (Brunner et al., 2012; Guattari, 1995, 2008; Haraway, 2008, 2014, 2015; Lazaratto, 2008; O’Sullivan, 2010, 2016), I assumed that women who were invested in artistic practice would possibly interconnect film reception with the creation of other worlds. For the purpose of this article, I center on the writing of one of these participants, Maikue who agreed in the use of her first name.

I follow Jackson and Mazzei's (2012) and St. Pierre's (2015) suggestion that in the wake of theories framing subjectivity as more-than-human, outbound, relational, and worldly, one cannot use data in ways that center and essentialize the subject. In this respect, I move away from interpretivism, to think *diffractionally* with Maikue's writing. Diffraction is a term that comes from physics and centers on the study of contact zones that create spaces of mutual interference, which disrupts linearity. Diffraction has been adopted by cultural research to think *with* data as a process of differentiation, which does not confirm a subject that-it-already-is, but outlines a process of *becoming-with* the writing (Barad, 2008; Taguchi, 2012), which follows a double aim:

- a. How Miyazaki's films are recomposed into other cultural practices and contribute to an aesthetic production of subjectivity.
- b. How Maikue's response provokes an encounter with an unexpected newness that differentiates me as a researcher.

### *Passages of Maikue's Narrative*

My name is Maikue, I'm 29-years-old, and consider myself a Hmong-American female artist and art educator. Most of my artwork looks at traditional and contemporary views of female identity/body. My choice of medium is fibers and textiles; however, I enjoy illustrating and drawing in a style that is inspired by manga and anime. I am particularly attached to this genre of animation as I grew up acknowledging it as an Asian inspiration in American pop culture, the next closest thing to being Asian-Hmong and American.

The first Hayao Miyazaki movie that I saw was *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001), when it first debuted in America. I bought it as soon as it came out on DVD, with the money I had earned from my first job as a food server at a Chinese fast food restaurant called *Wong's Wok*. At the time, I felt like I was in control of what I could buy. In a sense, I was feeling more like an independent adult. I had purchased it at a Walmart upon remembering the title of the film in an article that I had read in an issue of *Newtype* magazine.

I had started collecting and buying anime and manga because it was all I could think of to do with my earnings other than food, candy, and clothes. It was also a time in my life where I was an at-risk high school student, skipping school, and not wanting to be at home or in class. I had become bored or afraid at school and at home. At the time, I was also experiencing sexual abuse and had no one to talk to about the problems. Although it was not apparent at the time, I realized that I started reading and watching anime to escape the harsh realities of the trauma I had experienced.

I originally became interested in watching *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001) because of the reviews I read

about the film being a great film. In addition, it was a coming-of-age story about a girl who had to prove herself or stand her ground against all odds of an unfamiliar world. After seeing it, I became very interested in the beauty of anime and manga illustration that Miyazaki captured. What was very alluring to me about his films was the vast amount of skies and the sea green blue hues which is typical of his work across many of his films. I grew to understand how he could address complex issues through anime in real but in fantasy form. Through familiarizing myself with his work, as an adult, I realized how it stems from my own personal experiences.

Before *Spirited Away* (Ahinara & Miyazaki, 2001), as a child, I watched *Sailor Moon* and *Dragon Ball* religiously every morning before school. I was particularly drawn to the Sailor Mercury character as she was smart, didn't really have a love interest, and she was the first heroine I had seen who had dark short hair, like myself when I was 5- to 8-years-old. My first manga series I began collecting in high school was called *Fruits Baskets*, reawakening my interest in anime/manga culture. In this series, the teenagers were dealing with unspoken issues or traumas, something I related to as a teenager.

I have noticed that most of Miyazaki's endings linger in the thought of the mistakes and failures that the heroines and the characters face. It does not leave the viewers satisfied, but puts them to think about why it happened. In *Princess Mononoke* (Martin & Miyazaki, 1997), even when San and Ashitaka return the head of the Forest Spirit to its body, the viewer's expectation that the Forest Spirit would come back to life is let down. This ending left me to wonder, about the truths in folklore regarding the belief that, maybe, a long time ago, spirits had existed to protect the natural and animal world. What makes his films different from Western and other animation films is that they are not happily ever after films. The heroines have lost people in their lives, concurred their fears, and experience the traumas of war, they still have to move on with their lives and figure out how to deal with the problems they have endured. They rarely end up with a prince to save their day or help them move on, they move on as real people do when they have endured hardships.

I think what interests me in the world that Miyazaki creates is that he places the female lead in the middle of the problems that affect several worlds. She tries to figure out how she should exist in-between based on interactions with people that she encounters and bring something new into her life. Princess Nausicaä, for example, is caught between a world polluted as a result of humankind's mistakes, the people she tries to protect, and the creatures that live on it. Nausicaä becomes an advocate for the creatures while fighting to maintain balance between all the people seeking to take advantage of the natural environment. Her childhood experiences drive her passion for protecting the creatures, as

well as her family and villagers, something that makes her seek for modes of coexistence between humans and the creatures (Maikue, December 28, 2015, personal narrative).

## Reading Data Diffractively

Reading data in a diffractive way involves recognition that I am neither the authority, nor the sole subject of knowledge production on Miyazaki's relational worlds, and that knowledge is produced through polyvocal narratives. Maikue's narrative offers a number of partial stories, which suggest a relation of long duration with Miyazaki's films that is differentiating and self-actualizing both for herself as a writer and for myself as a reader. It draws me to the encounter with existential territories and unexpected affects, and differs from my own affective experiences with the films and how I have been produced through them.

A diffractive analysis looks for how the entanglements of the discursive material happen in the production of subjectivity. It looks for a subjectivity that is not only constituted by social models but made through creative processes of self-making in a world that is more-than-human (Taguchi, 2012). In Maikue's narrative, I notice not only discursive-material assemblages made of social models (e.g., being Hmong-American, being considered an at-risk student, and being a subject of abuse, etc.) and institutions (e.g., school, work, family, Walmart, and media) but also singular forms of material existence and affects (e.g., boredom, fear, search for independence, non-communication, delayed understandings, beauty, allure, and agency).

It is not my goal to reconstruct these assemblages to represent the truth of Maikue's biography, if that is ever possible. Rather, I sense in these assemblages an entanglement of complexity, conflict, and creativity that is worth noting. This makes me think in the relation between Maikue and Miyazaki's films not as individual and personal, but as relational, made of transversal connections containing not only situations of subjectivization but also those of rupture, suture, and recomposition:

I grew to understand how [Miyazaki] could address complex issues through anime in both real but in fantasy form. Through familiarizing myself with his work, as an adult, I realized how it stems from my own personal experiences. (Maikue, 2015, p. 1)

Such recompositional statement alludes to a process of becoming-with the films that contains a deep sense of time that is neither diachronic, nor generational. It is a multi-temporal durational time where the past is encountered and recomposed in the present through what Guattari (1995) describes as an *absorbant subjectivity* that continues self-actualizing through multiple mediations bringing molecular ruptures and bifurcations. I sense some of these molecular ruptures occurring when Maikue first describes her consumption of anime as way "to

escape the harsh realities of the trauma I had experienced." I sense this rupture happening again when Maikue implies that Miyazaki's *shojo* offer semiotic, expressive, and sensorial motifs to recompose one's life in affirming ways. "The heroines have lost people in their lives, concurred their fears, and experience the traumas of war, they still have to move on with their lives and figure out how to deal with the problems they have endured."

Originally, in the text that Maikue mailed, the passages dedicated to Nausicaä included a selection of film stills featuring different scenes in the film including Nausicaä aligning with the Ohmu, the murderous insects which humans intend to exterminate. I feel that Maikue's narrative resonated with the concept of *queer kin* (Taylor, 2013). This is the figuration of non-essentialist, promiscuous, symbiotic alliances of children (and possibly Maikue, and I) with non-human others. Maikue's narrative incarnates a curiosity of how Nausicaä is committed to build a world of unlikely relations and correspondences that will alter the parasitic behavior of human kind, a world of "what does not yet exist, what has nevertheless the right to exist and elaborate itself" (Grosz, 2012, p. 72).

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